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AUTHOR Hayden, Ruth
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ABSTRACT

For the purpose of examining the relationship between preschool children's level of literacy development and the contextualization of story content to the children's world knowledge, a study was conducted investigating how parents of high and low print aware children contextualize stories for them in terms of their prior knowledge. The study involved 27 children, ranging in age from 4 years 7 months to 5 years 9 months, and 40 parents. Thirteen children were identified as High Print Aware and 14 as Low Print Aware. A familiar or favorite story and an unfamiliar story were read by each participating adult to his or her child. Tape recordings of the readings were transcribed and analyzed descriptively to determine instances of contextualization. Results indicated that High Print Aware children and their parents contextualized textual information within their own background experiences more frequently than did parents of Low Print Aware children and the Low Print Aware children themselves. With familiar texts, parents of High Print Aware children contextualized information an average of four times per story; with unfamiliar stories, the average dropped to two times per story. Parents of Low Print Aware children contextualized information on an average of once per story, regardless of familiarity. The findings suggest that with High Print Aware children, contextualization may serve a social function rather than work as a means of establishing meaning. However, they appear to have an advantage over their Low Print Aware counterparts, as the latter have less opportunity to broaden their knowledge by linking story information to their own understanding of the world. (Author/JC)

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MEDIATING STORY BOOK EXPERIENCES

RUTH (HELEN) HAYDEN

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
EDMONTON, CANADA

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ABSTRACT

Joint book reading is an integral part of family life for many children and has been considered significant in influencing subsequent success in literacy development. More needs to be known about how parents and children interact in a joint book situation. Do parents interact differently with preschool children who have reached a higher level of literacy devlopment versus children who are less aware of print? This study was designed to investigate how parents of high and low print aware children contextualize stories for them in terms of their prior knowledge. The sample consisted of 27 children and forty parents. A familiar or favourite story and an unfamiliar story were read by each participating adult to his/her child. Tape recordings of the readings were transcribed and analysed descriptively to determine instances of contextualization. A concept about print test indicated the children's level of literacy devlopment. Results indicated that High Print Aware children and their parents contextualized textual information within their own background experiences more frequently than did parents of Low Print Aware children and the Low Print Aware children themselves. Familiarity of text is frequently a vehicle for contextualization.

MEDIATING STORY BOOK EXPERIENCES

Research in the area of early literacy development has attested to the fact that parents read to their preschool children. Durkin (1966), Schickedanz and Sullivan (1984) and Wells (1982), just to mention a few, have noted that reading to children is a common behaviour in family life. One may ask therefore what accounts for the wide differences in literacy awareness found among children who come from similar backgrounds and neighbourhoods. It is possible that some parents contextualize the events within the texts to their children's lives more frequently than do other parents. Such a strategy might account in part for some children's advanced literacy development upon entering school. In other words, some parents may be providing a sense-building support system for their children as they share stories together thereby fostering an awareness that the understanding of text lies within oneself. The language of the situation, in this case the text, is moved to a larger related context. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between preschool children's level of literacy development and the contextualization of story content to the children's world knowledge.

Gordon Wells (1983) has noted from his longitudial studies that the story book conversation which evolves between reader and child provides a brigde between the context dependent conversation which is carried on in everyday activities and the context independent talk of school. Frequently school verbal interactions do not have the support of an ongoing activity where pointing and other non-verbal language may bring meaning to the situation. The highly contextualized environmental print which is mediated for children in their daily lives demands less of a cognitive leap for

understanding to take place than the reading of decontextualized texts. For environmental print, the word 'Bank' on the Bank of America sign, or the word 'Milk' on the carton are supported by the context in which they are found. Words in text, however, frequently do not have this support, even in those stories which are written and illustrated for very young children. Therefore, moving from the here and now situations which are embedded in text to the there and then of past experiences may be an important element for children to grasp cognitively as they become readers of text. Encouraging children to respond to experiences held within a story in light of similar experiences and events in their own lives may assist them in developing literacy knowledge. Cochran Smith (1984) refers to this phenomenon as a text to life strategy for obtaining meaning from and bringing meaning to print. Thus the situations and events within stories are used to expand the child's spatial and temporal world.

Several researchers including Bloome (1985) and Robinson and Sulzby (1984) have indicated that familiarity of text does influence the nature of interaction between reader and child. There is no doubt that many variables affect whether a text is related to the child's life experiences. The variable considered for this study was the familiarity or non familiarity aspects of books.

Forty parents and 27 preschool children from both rural and urban communities comprised the sample for the study. The selection of parents was based on the criteria that reading to their children was a usual occuuance for them. In 13 families, both parents shared this responsibility; in the remaining 14 families, the mother or the father was the main reader for the child. Each child was assessed with respect to his or her print knowledge by using a Concept About Print test, similar in genre to that of

Clay's Sand test (1979). Percentage scores for recognition of literacy concepts ranged from 20% to 92%, with a median score of 65%. Thirteen children ranging above that score were identified as High Print Aware, with fourteen being identified as Low Print Aware. In the case of six of the Low Print Aware and eight of the High Print Aware children, a familiar (that is, a favourite book found in the home) and an unfamiliar story, chosen by the researcher, was read to them individually by each of their parents on different occasions. The remaining children were only read to by only one participating parent. It should be noted that all the children were from two parents families. There did not appear to be a relationship between those children read to by both of their parents and the level of children's literacy awareness as six of the LPA children had both parents participating in the study.. Although sex was not a variable for consideration, 11 boys and 16 girls comprised the sample with ages ranging from 4 years 7 months to 5 years 9 months.

The familiar texts, all narratives, were stories the children chose as favourites and which had been read to them several times. These books ranged in variety from traditional renditions by Walt Disney Productions and Golden Press to the more modern selections by Sendak, Meunsch and Berenstain. The unfamiliar stories, on the other hand, were two less well known fairy tales by Grimm--The Three Spinners and King Grisly Beard, which had been altered slightly to make them more suitable in style for today's child.

Verbatim transcriptions were made of the audio-taped reading sessions which were carried out in the home. Within transcripts, instances of contextualization were tabulated nominally. These instances differed from simple explanations. "Vicious is being mean" would not have been recorded

as a contextualization example. However, the statement "vicious is like when Jojo growls and snaps at you when you tease him through the fence", wherein the concept of 'vicious' is related to a broader world knowledge, to a particular background experience that the child had had, would be tabulated as a contextualization example.

Figure 1 and 2 show the average number of instances per group for contextualizing print within the story readings. Parents of High Print Aware children contextualized text information more frequently than the parents of Low Print Aware children within familiar texts, with an average of 4 contextualizations per story , the range being from 2-6. Within unfamiliar stories, however, the frequency of contextualizations dropped to only an average of 2 per text. Parents of Low Print Aware children, on the other hand, contextualized text events on the average of 1 per story, regardless of text familiarity. The range for both reading situations also did not differ.

High Print Aware children also were more frequent in their attempts to relate text situations to experiences in their own lives than their Low Print Aware peers although the differences were not as great as those noted for parents.

It should be noted that although High Print Aware children and their parents dialogued somewhat more with respect to the number of words used than Low Print Aware children and their parents during a story session, the nature of the interactions, particularily within the favourite or familiar stories appeared to be qualitatively different from one group to the other. With few exceptions, parents read both kinds of stories verbatim, stopping at points where they thought some items needed clarification. Words which might be unknown or episodes which explored a confict between characters were the main targets for clarification for both groups of parents.

In order to demonstrate the attempts or non attempts on the part of the adult readers to relate text to life, the following protocols are somewhat typical of dyad interactions. Focussing first of all upon unfamiliar stories,the first sample demonstrates how one mother of a HPA child moved her child towards understanding the author's meaning by relating the text information to her daughter's world knowledge. The story has progressed to the point where the young girl is required by the queen to spin flax.

Text (The Three Spinners)

Mother : What's flax?

Melanie (HPA) : I don't know.

M.: It's a type of --um--grain, a plant that grows and you use it to make linen, a material like--you know our best tablecloth? The red one we use at Christmas? That's linen.

Melanie: Oh.

M.: You use flax to spin. Do you know what I mean by spin?

Melanie: Turn?

M.: Yes. The wheel turns. Remember Auntie Bertha had an spinning wheel? Remember that? And I told you when you were older you could have one for your very own?

Melanie: Yeah.

M.: Well, on that wheel you can put thread on it and spin it. Well, a sheep has wool but the wool is all in kinds of balls and you pull the balls of wool for threads with the spinning wheel and make the wool very thin and then you make a sweater from it, like the one Nana knit for you. So when you spin the wool it's like when you spin the flax so that you can make--use it and crochet and make things with it. See?

The parent, in her explanation, reaches into the life of the child to find concrete examples or instances which relate to the decontextualized concepts presented in the text. The mother focusses upon what is familiar to the child in order to explain an unfamiliar concept, in this case flax and thereby assists the child in linking what she knows to what she does not understand. In addition, the adult is not only demonstrating that one may gain knowledge from print but one's understanding of text lies within one's own experience, considered a central factor in literacy development.

When the dialogue between a LPA child and his father is examined, there appears to be a qualitative difference in the kinds of interaction which takes place, although the same topic generates the diccussion.

Text (The Three Spinners)

Father : Do you know what flax is?

Billy (LPA) : No. What's it?

F.: Well, it's hard to explain but it's---no, it's stuff that grows and people cut it down and pound on it so that it gets like cloth and they make things out of it.

B.: Oh. Make things?

F.: Right! It's for making things. Cloth things, like clothes.

B.: Cloth, clothes; cloth, clothes.

F.: Right on!. That's it. That's flax.

This explanation does not focus upon some particularily familiar experience in the child's life. A link between what is in the text and what the child knows is not provided. The references to cloth and clothes lacks specificity in identifying some particular items and therefore the child could infer that any cloth or clothes are make from flax. Providing an explanation

in a concrete or experiential way for the youngster to assist in his interpretation of the unknown item is not evident.

As can be seen from the above examples, the function for contextualization centered upon developing meaning for new concepts contained within the new texts. Parents of both High Print Aware and Low Print Aware children attempted to clarify what was unknown to the children. However, the nature of the explanations differed.

With respect to familiar stories, instances of contextualization were more prevalent particularily for the parents of High Print Aware children. The following example demonstrates how a parent of a High Print Aware child assists the youngster in bringing world knowledge to the concepts presented in the text. Jeff and his father have just reached the point in the story where the Cookie Monster is asked to share his cookie.

TEXT : (Cookie Monster and the Cookie Jar)

Father : What's wrong with Cookie Monster?

Jeff (HPA): He doesn't like nobody to share his cookies.

Father: Remember when you didn't want to share with Sherri? What did she do?

Jeff: She pulled my hair out! And it hurt. I cried, didn't I, Dad?

Father: Sure did. You learned not to be selfish about your bike. But old Cookie Monster gets discouraged about sharing, remember?

Jeff: Discour.....?

Father: Discouraged, like when things just won't go right. Remember when I was fixing the washing machine and it wouldn't fix?

Jeff: You just sat in the chair and Mum put the tools in your box.

Father: Yeah. I sure did. I was sad and mad then, cause nothing

worked. That's discouraged like Cookie Monster. Let's read more now, okay?

This protocol demonstrates the father's attempts to relate the here and now of text information to the there and then of past experiences within the child's life. The opportunity for contextualization offered by the text was capitalized upon by the adult, moving the child to interpret events within the story in light of his own world knowledge. It may be suggested that the father was informally instructing his child to understand that meaning for text lies within his own experiences.The parents is demonstrating to Jeff that by actively bringing his own life to bear on the text, he will have a deeper understanding of the story..

In contrast, the second example between a Low Print Aware child and her mother appears lacks the linking of text to real life experiences. The child and her mother have just started the book and have reached the point where the king is going to get married again.

TEXT (Snow White)

Mother: All the people are celebrating. Know what celebrating is?

Jennifer (LPA): The bells are ringing. And they're all happy 'cept Snow White.

Mother: Yeah! That's celebrating..... And the king is going to have a new queen. Poor Snow White, she's not celebrating, is she?

Jennifer: No. She's sad there up in the window. She doesn't want her for a mum.

Mother: No, she doesn't. She's not happy. No party for her, that's for sure. Would you like that?

Jennifer: What?.

Mother: Everyone having a party and you're not.

Jennifer: No way! And I don't want another mum.

Mother: You wouldn't celebrate then, would you?

Jennifer: No way!

In this example, the opportunity to relate the concept of celebration to a particular, joyous occasion in the child's life, such as a birthday party or family reunion at Thanksgiving, was not presented. It is clear that Jennifer does have an understanding of what 'celebrating' means; however, relating story content and literacy activities to the child's own lived experience is not evident. The linking or bridging of what is in the text to what is already known does not appear to have taken place. There is a lack of specificity with respect to the word 'celebration', a lack of a concrete/experiential explanation.

Because these were familiar texts, and therefore by definition had been read several times to the child, it is possible that a more personal explanation of 'celebration' had been provided at an earlier reading session. Researchers such as Ninio and Bruner (1978) and Teale (1986) have noted that what a parent focusses upon during one reading session, the child will frequently take as his point of interest in a subsequent reading. One might suspect therefore, that the High Print Aware children are picking up the cues of contextualizing events in stories to their own experiences as a result of their parents' behaviour.

The following example, which involves both parent and child contextualizing text, highlights the interdependency which exists between text reader and the child in transcending text.

Mother : Look at that!

Cathy (HPA): Um-um. It's pretty, only that part isn't.

M.: The water's not pretty?

C.: No, I don't think so.

M.: Well, maybe not.

C.: It's terrible.

M.: The waterfall's--it's nice though, isn't it?

C.: What's--where's the waterfall?

M.: That's the waterfall, the white water coming down into the pool.

C.: Our pool's not like that.

M.: You're right. It's not. Remember when we were in the Enchanted Forest last summer, there was a waterfall?

C.: Yeah, but it didn't come from the trees like that here.

M.: Well, it doesn't come quite from the trees itself but it comes from the stream up by the trees.

C.: But Mom, it's going from that tree to---(makes swooshing sound).

M.: Yeah, sort of, I guess. It's hard to make out really. Looks like my drawings.

C.: Your drawings are nice, Mom. That's a nice one over there. It looks like a tree trunk, Mom. It does.

M.: It does look much like, yeah.

Both Cathy and her mother are very social in their verbal exchanges. The dialogue is generated by the story and the accompanying illustrations. There is mote than simple explanation to provide understanding for the child. Each partner in turn agrees, disagrees with or expands upon the other's point of view, bringing in her own background experience.

The social dynamics of shared book reading which are evident here, indicate that familiarity of text may provide more time to talk about

experiences which relate to the story. The dialogue does not interfer with the story line because the plot is already known. One may suggest that within the familiar text, contextualization in order to develop meaning is not the prime focus; rather, the objective may be to enhance the verbal interactions between the dyads.

Parents of Low Print Aware children and their youngstersalso dialogued during favourite story readings. However instances of contextualization within familiar texts, as with unfamiliar texts, were less frequent and the sharing of ideas less potent. In the following protocol, a Low Print Aware child and her mother take turns in the conversation.
Text (The clown Around Us)

Mother: There's a bird on top of the chimney, see?

Vanessa (LPA): Yeah

M.: And there's a nine on the house. Look! No--here, in this part. See? Here?

V.: Yeah, a nine.

M.: And what's the baby sleeping in?

V.: A banana bed.

M.: Yes! Good for you. A banana bed. You knew that, didn't you?

V.: I'd like a banana bed.

M.: You would, would you? Well, we'll see about that. And what's the elephant doing?

V.: The water's coming out of his nose.
M.: (laughs) Not his nose, his trunk. See? He sucks the water in his trunk and then twists it into his mouth.

This exchange does not have the same atmosphere of exchange of ideas, the sharing of knowledgeas in the preevious examples of Cathy and

her mother. Rather the focus appear to be more towards testing of the child's knowledge of the text rather than the discussion of personal experiences which relate to the text. Vanessa indicates a personal interest ("I'd like a banana bed") in one of the objects generated by the text; her mother's comments, however, do not lead to an explorations of the child's ideas. Although there is a give and take in both dialogues, the exchange of ideas which King (1985) and others have noted as being an integral part for sharing common frames of reference for text, the first example of Cathy and her mother, demonstrates how parents of High Print Aware children and their parentsnegotiate meaning surrounding text. Vanessa and her mother, on the other hand, do not explore ideas which are common to the text and their own experiences to the same degree.

The function of contextualization may therefore be different for familiar as opposed to unfamiliar texts. Rather than contextualizing in order to develop meaning primarily, the objective in familiar stories may be to enhance the social aspects of joint reading experiences.

It appears that overall, parents of High Print Aware children, by their questions and explanations, demonstrate to their children that what they already know is a vehicle for understanding author intent. In addition, they make efforts to encourage their children to accommodate textual information within a personal framework. Such behaviour was evident regardless of familiarity of text, although frequency of contextualization was more evident in favourite stories. Such transcendent features were less evident in the story dialogues of Low Print Aware children and their parents. In addition, enhancing the text through conversations which involved the sharing of ideas and negotiation of meanings were also less obvious in the dialogues of Low Print Aware children and their parents.

In conclusion, it might be stated that High Print Aware children were provided with opportunities to expand their cognitive horizons and to modify their personal knowledge in light of textual information. Their parents helped them to go beyond the text data and assisted them in generating expanded meaning by drawing on real life experiences. The adults made efforts to use story book episodes as potent situations for mediated learning experiences. As Paulo Freire (1983) has noted, reading the world and reading the word are central to becoming a literate person. Parents of Low Print Aware children were less likely to focus upon the opportunities for contextualization offered by the text, regardless of familiarity, which could be related to the specific world knowledge of their children. These parents seemed to be less aware of the importance of their children's world knowledge as a means for understanding author intent.

The parents of High Print Aware children, were more successful in linking texts to world knowledge than the parents of children who were less advanced in literacy development. For these parents and their children, the familiarity of a text was a potent vehicle for encouraging an understanding of the centrality of one's own world knowledge in comprehending text.

The implications for teachers of early readers seem clear. They should be sensitive to children's existing knowledge about text content. For those children who have not had the opportunity in their preschool years, to become aware of the relationship between what they know and what is found in stories, teachers must make efforts to contextualize book episodes with them, to mediate for them the experiences found within storybooks, by relating the text happenings to previous happenings in the children's lives. In order to encourage the haring of ideas between author and child, the

rereading of familiar stories is of importance. Furthermore, teachers and children can build social dialogues around stories which are familiar.

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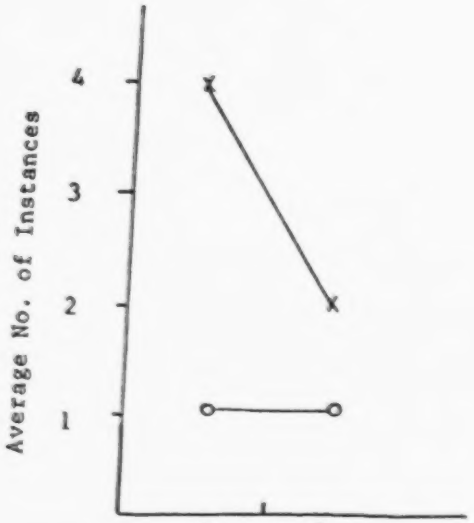


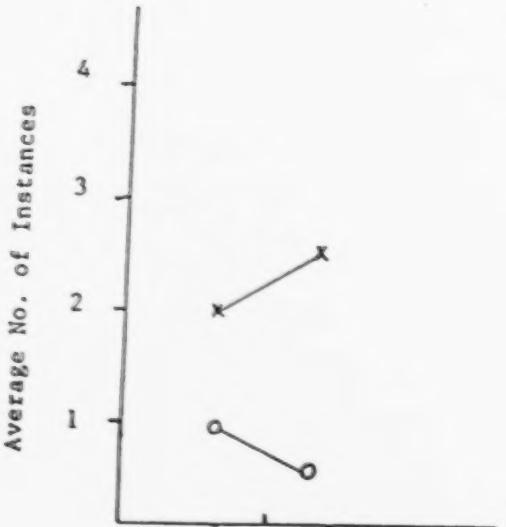
X = Parents of HPA Children

O = Parents of LPA Children

		fam	unfam
range	O	0-2	0-2
	X	2-6	1-4

Figure 1

Contextualization by Parents



X = HPA Children

O = LPA Children

		fam	unfam
range	O	0-2	0-1
	X	1-3	1-4

Figure 2

Contextualization by Children